

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The Tragedy of Afghanistan

Aug. 15, 2021

By The Editorial Board

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The rapid reconquest of the capital, Kabul, by the Taliban after two decades of a staggeringly expensive, bloody effort to establish a secular government with functioning security forces in Afghanistan is, above all, unutterably tragic.

Tragic because the American dream of being the “indispensable nation” in shaping a world where the values of civil rights, women’s empowerment and religious tolerance rule proved to be just that: a dream.

This longest of American wars was code-named first Operation Enduring Freedom and then Operation Freedom’s Sentinel. Yet after more than \$2 trillion and at least 2,448 American service members’ lives lost in Afghanistan, it is difficult to see what of lasting significance has been achieved.

It is all the more tragic because of the certainty that many of the Afghans who worked with the American forces and bought into the dream — and especially the girls and women who had embraced a measure of equality — have been left to the mercy of a ruthless enemy.

The Biden administration was right to bring the war to a close. Yet there was no need for it to end in such chaos, with so little forethought for all those who sacrificed so much in the hopes of a better Afghanistan.

Numberless Afghans who had worked for years alongside American troops, civil society groups, aid organizations and journalists, including the many who had worked with The New York Times, abruptly found themselves in mortal danger on Sunday as the Taliban swept into Kabul as leaders of the Afghan government, including President Ashraf Ghani, headed for the airport.

It was tragic, too, because with the bitter political divide of today's America, efforts to draw critical lessons from this calamitous setback have already been enmeshed in angry recriminations over who lost Afghanistan, ugly schadenfreude and lies. Within hours of the fall of Kabul, the knives were already out.

While the speed of the collapse of the Afghan government was shocking, the result should not have come as a surprise. This calamity cannot be laid alone at President Biden's feet, but it is incumbent on the current administration to make right what has gone wrong with the withdrawal plans. The U.S. military is, if nothing else, a logistical superpower, and it should move heaven and earth and anything in between to rescue those people who have risked everything for a better future. Mr. Biden on Monday said that evacuation efforts will continue, a welcome development. Red tape shouldn't stand between allies and salvation.

The war in Afghanistan began in response by the United States and its NATO allies to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as an operation to deny Al Qaeda sanctuary in a country run by the Taliban. How it evolved into a two-decade nation-building project in which as many as 140,000 troops under American command were deployed at one time is a story of mission creep and hubris but also of the enduring American faith in the values of freedom and democracy.

The Afghanistan papers published in The Washington Post — including a confidential project to identify "Lessons Learned" conducted by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, an agency created by Congress — painted a devastating picture of corruption, incompetence, lack of motivation and other flaws among the Afghan forces that the United States and its allies were trying to mold into a serious military.

One Navy official said Afghans viewed their police as "the most hated institution" in Afghanistan. Other officials described systematic looting by soldiers and officers, as well as Afghan casualties so huge — 60,000 killed since 2001, by one estimate — that the government kept them a secret. The corruption was so rampant that many Afghans began to question whether their government or the Taliban were the greater evil.

The Pentagon and the U.S. Congress deserve a share of the blame for the debacle, and certainly for the rosy progress reports that so often emerged. But what the United States or its allies could or should have done differently — and whether that hoary cliché about Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires has been validated once again — is a debate that should consume politicians, pundits and historians for years to come.

The responsibility lies with both parties. President George W. Bush launched the war, only to shift focus to Iraq before any stability had been achieved. President Barack Obama was seeking to withdraw American troops but surged their levels instead. President Donald Trump signed a peace deal with the Taliban in 2020 for a complete withdrawal by last May.

When Mr. Biden came to office, some Defense Department and other officials urged him to keep a small counterterrorism force in Afghanistan for several more years. But Mr. Biden, old enough to remember Vietnam and a veteran of foreign relations from his years in the Senate, became convinced that a few thousand troops remaining for a few more years in Afghanistan would not prevent an eventual Taliban victory. On April 6 he told his staff that he wanted all the troops out by Sept. 11. “I was the fourth president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan — two Republicans, two Democrats,” he said later. “I would not, and will not, pass this war on to a fifth.”

It was a decision that took courage and wisdom. The president knew full well what his critics would make of it — what they are already making of it. There will always be the what-if, that if only American troops had stayed longer, the outcome would have been different. Mr. Biden himself has been somewhat disingenuous in blaming Mr. Trump for his deal with the Taliban, which the president said “left the Taliban in the strongest position militarily since 2001.”

It has long been clear that an American withdrawal, however or whenever conducted, would leave the Taliban poised to seize control of Afghanistan once again. The war needed to end. But the Biden administration could and should have taken more care to protect those who risked everything in pursuit of a different future, however illusory those dreams proved to be.

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